A Safe Place

There is only one thing I am innately afraid of – earthquakes.

As pre-school children, my brother and I were unaware of the political atmosphere of 1960 and the cold war. So, when a massive explosion violently shook our small 5 room house – we were all terrified. Mom grabbed Brian and me and shoved us under a table, then disappeared out the front door. A deafening roar went on and on as the earth shaking continued. It may have been safer to be under a table indoors, but I would have rather been at Moms side wherever she had gone.

Years later I learned a worker on a tractor, moving earth at the end of the airport runway, had nicked a large gas line. No, I do not believe he survived. However, I can safely enjoy the loud noise of thunder because I know I have not been hit by the lightning that caused it. But if the ground under my feet begins to rumble and shake, I am out of the door in a heartbeat! Mom? Mom!

I never felt safe or comfortable inside a building. Oh, there were the necessities of shelter, food, and warmth, but I could not see the hidden dangers behind the walls. Outdoors I could see the sky and horizon; I could see, feel, and hear what was coming.

Of all the buildings I felt uneasy within, a house of worship topped the chart. One of the neighborhood mothers discovered we did not attend church of any kind. Her concern turned into an invitation to attend Sunday school at the other end of our street. To appease my parents, who saw a chance for some alone time, my brother and I went to church. Having had no religious upbringing, this experience seemed overwhelming. We were clueless of all but the most basic bible stories. I was a novice advocate of the natural sciences and Darwin's Theory of Evolution, so I found the concept of religion alien and unnecessary. After enduring the morning service, we were whisked away with the other children for Sunday school. After finally escaping the long, uncomfortable session of bible banter, one of the teachers stopped me at the door and asked if we would be back for the evening service. I am sure the blank, horrified look on my face said it all!

For some reason I found religion rather creepy. I understood the golden rule and most of the Ten Commandments – was not that enough? I fancied the idea of coming back in a different form after I died. If that was not an option, I had no problem with death. It was like going to sleep and not waking up. I could live with that.

Years later my father was lamenting the fact we were never baptized. He was feeling older and wanted to hedge his bets. So, he rose from the kitchen table mom, and I were sitting at, went over to the kitchen sink, and returned with a handful of water. Sprinkling me he said, "There, you're baptized!" Works for me.

If being uncomfortable inside a building weighed on me, being inside my head was an even heavier place. I did believe in a spirit world, a higher power. It just was not inside a book or a building.

There was a painting at my grandparents' home of the Great Smoky Mountains in the Blue Ridge of Virginia. On Sundays, after Brian and I finished mowing and edging their yard for a little spending money; I would lay on their sofa and stare at that painting. What a beautiful, peaceful place it was, and like Alice in Wonderland, I was pulled into it. I dozed off while listening to the sweet, simple songs of the Sandpipers on grandpa's console stereo.

I needed a safe place to go in my head, because I was becoming mired down with horrible thoughts. At night, as I tried to turn off my mind, images and scenarios kept tormenting me. I would think of elaborate torture devices to relieve men of their private parts. The sicker the better. No way could I generate any affection for those slimy pink sausages. I began to enjoy the stories of Edgar Allen Poe and the history of "Vlad the Impaler." To shove these images from my mind, I envisioned lying before a huge locomotive; its shrill whistle blaring, raging closer and hitting me – knocking the evil thoughts from my mind. It worked for a while.

What I needed was a way to control my heart and head, instead of letting them control me. I needed a champion; a parallel universe I could exist within. So, as I became more of a recluse in my room, I began to draft stories. I borrowed the 'Green Hornet' characters of Britt Reed and Kato and created an elaborate world that was a mixture of Rudyard Kipling's,' 'Jungle Book' and Rima, from 'Green Mansions.' Home and sanctuary were within that painting from my grandparents' home – I called it the 'Wingsong.'

My secret life sustained me as for comfort and companionship. Mom worried I would spend too much time in my room and did her best to engage me in the real world. I did OK in school and fancied myself to be a good artist (like my folks), but I found dealing with kids my age a chore. I wore a constant, subdued expression.

Sometimes, on my way home from school, I would pause to climb the massive granite boulder that rose up from the empty field behind our house. Gray Rock allowed a sweeping view of the San Jacinto mountains, and the rolling oat and wheat fields that surrounded the airport runway. An occasional pepper tree provided a mini oasis from the relentless California sun. Gray Rock, like Wingsong, was a safe place I could go to. Its tangible reality doubled as a surrogate altar. A place to offer up a troubled heart to the heavens. I always knew my concerns were heard because of a sudden breath of wind, or a butterfly dancing by.

Imagine the cruel irony when I learned years later that Gray Rock had been dynamited into oblivion by the local church – for a parking lot.